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Remnants of the American War: An Interactive Documentary

Jacob Sussman

SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad

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Jacob Sussman
Professor Thanh Duong
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Remnants of the American War - An Interactive Documentary

Abstract

Remnants of the American War is an interactive documentary exploring the legacy of the American War in Vietnam. The project tells the stories of individuals who were affected by or are involved with the conflict's legacy within an interactive web interface. Envisioned as the counter-narrative to existing American portrayals of the conflict, the project seeks to illuminate Vietnamese perspectives that are often unheard within Western culture.

Featuring interviews with veterans, social workers, and artists whom I encountered during a month long journey from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, the project highlights ongoing issues such as Agent Orange and Vietnam's residual land mines, and poses broader questions about the nature of the war, and what it means to the Vietnamese people. The project is a multimedia mixing of photographic portraiture, documentary film, and interactive web design.

Acknowledgements

This project could never have been possible without the support of a large community of people who helped me to develop my concept, refine it, and execute it all in the course of two months. Foremost, I am forever in debt to my Academic Director, Co Thanh Duong, for her incredible guidance and support, and for her willingness to connect me with an unbelievable network of contacts across the entire length of Vietnam. Almost every subject featured in my project was a direct result of Co Thanh's involvement, and during our constant emailings she was unerringly bright, helpful, and responsive. I will always remember the incredible experience she allowed me and the powerful lessons I have learned from it. I also want to extend this thanks to the SIT Staff Phat Nguyen and Linh Tran, who were similarly indispensable in helping me to navigate the complex logistics of the project, and graciously accompanied me as a translator to

several of my interview sites. They also provided additional help by completing wonderful translations of two of my key interviews. Professor Jason Picard also was key influence in the development of my concept and itinerary, and his inspiring discussion of Vietnam's history convinced me of this topic's relevance and importance.

In conclusion, I would like to open my heart to the incredible individuals who met with me, brought me into their lives, and shared their stories with the world in order to make this project a reality. This list includes Phan Thanh Tien and the VAVA organisation staff, Man Nguyen, Le Long Phi, Tran Thi Be, Chuck Palazzo, Pham Ha and the Peace Trees Organisation, Ngan, and Tran Huu Chanh, and many others. I have never spoken with so many inspiring people in such a short time, and their wisdom and perspectives will stay with me for years to come.

Research Questions

I sought to explore the following topics through this project:

1. Contemporary Perspectives on the War, and How It Has Been Remembered
2. The War Considered Within the Context of Vietnamese History
3. Lasting Repercussions of the War, Including Agent Orange and Residual Land Mines
4. Art Produced in Response to the War
5. War History as Tourism in Modern-day Vietnam
6. Constructive Peace, and How It Can Be Achieved

Objectives

In producing *Remnants of the American War*, my primary goal was to create a vessel through which Vietnamese perspectives on the conflict could be brought before a western audience. After learning more about the war, I became convinced that most Americans do not fully understand the conflict, why it happened, and the consequences that it has had for Vietnam. In particular, hearing about topics like the total number of Vietnamese casualties, the conflict's incredible environmental and economic toll, persistent problems such as Agent Orange and

landmines, and the outright insanity of US diplomats who initiated/prolonged the war was extremely upsetting to me, and served as the main impetus of my project. I felt a powerful compulsion to create an educational resource which could help Americans to educate themselves on these topics, exposing themselves to some of the perspectives and viewpoints that I had learned about while in Vietnam. My hope was that by sharing this crucial information, the US may be able to avoid similarly disastrous and immoral wars in the future.

By interviewing a diversity of people from all walks of life and perspectives, I aspired to create a multi-dimensional portrait of the conflict that was entirely told through Vietnamese voices (with the exception of my one western interviewee). My goal was to represent the perspectives and emotions of my subjects with minimal mediation, allowing their voices to be translated into the western sphere without being modified by my own viewpoint. The project will ultimately exist as a public website, and thus will be an open resource that people from all walks of life can access.

Justification

I chose to produce my ISP as interactive documentary because I view this medium as uniquely capable of exploring a topic as layered and complicated as the legacy of the American War in Vietnam. I-docs allow a multimedia presentation of content with optional linearity, through which I can showcase photos, videos, and data visualisations that illustrate the consequences of the war. This allowed me to represent my subjects through multiple visual mediums, rendering a literally multidimensional portrait of their character and narrative. My aesthetic style of presentation attempts to be unobtrusive and largely objective, carrying their unmediated voices to my audience with as little intervention as possible.

Context and Literature Review

Vietnam, Remembrances of the War, and the Conflict's Aftermath

As described in Hue-Tam Ho Tai's work *The Country of Memory*, Vietnam has entered a commemorative fever since the Doi-Moi reforms of 1980. This is not a passive process of archiving, but an active mediation of the past by cultural leaders who seek to frame history in light of modern-day government objectives. Questions such as who is in control of this process and what is being selectively remembered are essential to consider as the country progresses into the modern age. My project compels individuals to consider the process of remembrance, while also providing a medium through which local people can voice their own perspectives.

As noted by Christina Schwenkel in her essay "Exhibiting War, Reconciling Pasts: Photographic Representation and Transnational Commemoration in Contemporary Vietnam", the concept of Vietnamese remembrance has almost been entirely ignored by the American media. Whether in news journalism, Hollywood cinema, or written literature, the Vietnamese perspective is frequently subordinated to American-centric narratives, and thus is at risk of cultural erasure. My project will seek to reverse this trend by communicating Vietnamese perspectives on the war, and by creating an educational resource for American citizens to educate themselves on the conflict's repercussions. As the United States navigates an increasingly complex world stage today, it has become urgently important for its citizens to constructively reflect on the mistakes made in Vietnam, and how they can be avoided in the future.

As noted in Nick Hunt's *Patriots*, the American war had absolutely devastating consequences in Vietnam. Hunt notes that "South Vietnam eventually became the most heavily bombed country in the history of warfare," while civilian casualties have been estimated to exceed 2 million. Furthermore, overview of the diplomatic strategies that engineered the war are revealed to have been illogical, callous, and ultimately motivated by politician's desire to save face rather than legitimate political feasibility. After the war's conclusion, America significantly hindered Vietnam's economic development by placing economic sanctions on the nation for 20

years, and has not played a significant role in addressing ongoing issues such as Agent Orange and residual landmines.

Interactive Documentaries as a New Media Genre

As the documentary form evolves in the 21st century, filmmakers and creative technologists have increasingly turned to interactive mediums as a means of documentary expression. These projects, described as interactive documentaries or “i-docs”, leverage the formal potential of web design, social media, video games, and virtual reality to fulfill the specific cultural and social functions of the documentary film. During the past several years, I have become very interested in exploring the artistic and social potential of interactive media, and this project was an ideal opportunity to begin experimenting with the i-doc format. The ISP period in particular afforded me a uniquely free window of time to evolve beyond my background in film production and photography and develop a skill set that also encompassed web development and interactive design.

One branch of the interactive documentary has evolved within the field of institutionalised journalism, and is generally described as digital journalism. One example which operates under this model is the NY Times report on “The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek”, which highlights the avalanche effects and specific human narratives through text, pictures, video, and data graphics. As discussed in the MIT Open Doc Lab’s report on *Convergences Between Interactive Documentary and Digital Journalism*, interactive documentary and digital journalism practices are closely related and often borrow techniques and creative approaches from one another. Although my project is technically an independent interactive documentary as it has not been distributed by a news publication, I envision the project as part of both the documentary and journalistic traditions in its aesthetic approach and intended social function.

Methods

Project Itinerary

1. November 16th-22nd: Hanoi

- A. Met with local veteran group three times.
- B. Visited and recorded visual documentation of Hoi Lo Prison, National Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum, and Vietnamese Women's Museum.
- 2. November 23rd-27th: Danang
 - A. Completed research with VAVA, visiting clinic and interviewing Mr. Tien.
- 3. November 28th: Hoi An
 - A. Established contact with South Vietnamese veteran Man Nguyen.
- 4. November 29th: Danang
 - B. Filmed MRI event hosted by VAVA.
- 5. November 30th-December 2nd: Dong Ha
 - A. Completed research with Peace Trees Vietnam, visiting land mine clearance site and interviewing staff member Pham Ha and land mine victim Tran Thi Be.
 - B. Attended DMZ tour, recording visual documentation of war history sites.
- 6. December 3rd-4th: Danang
 - A. Established contact with American veteran Chuck Palazzo.
 - B. Filmed and took photographs of Agent Orange victims at local VAVA clinic.
- 7. December 5th-6th: Hoi An
 - A. Interviewed South Vietnamese veteran Man Nguyen.
- 8. December 8th-13th: Ho Chi Minh City
 - B. Interviewed artist Le Long Phi, War Remnants Museum Director Ms. Ngan, and Cu Chi Tunnels tour guide Mr. Tran Huu Chanh.

Overview

Over the course of one month, I traveled from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, visiting and interviewing with the contacts listed above in six different cities. I sought to form natural relationships with all of my subjects, and attempted to get to know them personally before filming them with my camera. Once an appropriate level of comfort had been attained, I would

film a video interview with my subject and take a photographic portrait of them. I was using a DSLR camera with zoom lens supported by a shoulder mount, giving the footage a candid, naturalistic feeling as the frame shifts and readjusts in rhythm with my interview subjects speech. I also sought to take a photographic portraits that revealed my subjects' personalities and emotions through visual framing.

To my mutual stimulation and frustration, the emergence of interactive documentary as a new media genre has not yet resulted in a rigid set of artistic conventions and practices. This both allowed me great creative freedom, but also made it difficult to tackle a medium which is so amorphous and undefined. I spent extensive periods of time reviewing Docubase, the database of interactive documentaries maintained by MIT's Open-Doc Lab, for inspiration in designing my own digital format. Many of the most innovative projects on Docubase are independently produced i-docs that work in the social and artistic tradition of documentary film. These projects, including *Hollow*, directed by Elaine Sheldon McMillion, and *Highrise*, directed by Katerina Cizek, are typically supported by "New Media" grants from film associations such as Sundance and Tribeca, and seek to leverage digital technology to shape social discourse and illuminate untold truths. Inspired by these projects, I contacted *Hollow*'s UX designer Jeff Soyk and video chatted with him about my project.

At the beginning of this semester, I did not know anything about web development, but I knew that I wanted to make an interactive documentary. Undeterred by my lack of technical knowledge, I embarked on a three month self-guided study of web design, learning the programming languages HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and jQuery, while also studying more artistic topics such as typography, graphic design, and interaction design. I completed 4 courses on Codecademy, read over 10 relevant ebooks on my Kindle, and constantly researched web design resources online, assembling an massive bookmark collection of helpful articles and forums. I also found the Developer Tools page in Chrome to be a helpful resource, as I could examine the

code underlying a site and see how it was constructed. I still regularly look for sites which inspire me, and make a note of their aesthetic and technical components for my own work.

By the end of my travels, I had completed video interviews and photo shoots with over 10 subjects, including veterans, social workers, artists, and victims who were involved in the war's repercussions. I recorded 13 hours of video, took 1739 photos, and wrote over 1000 lines of code. The project posed an enormous logistical challenge, as I had to carry a full documentary film kit with me across Vietnam, traveling 1000 miles through six different cities in the course of one month. I learned an enormous amount about myself through this month of independent travel, and now feel confident in my ability to execute ambitious multimedia projects in an international context.

My interactive documentary is not yet live on the web (as it is in need of further development and design), but you can view screenshots of my current UI mock-ups at the Google Drive link below. The interface features mouse-over functionality when the user hovers over the buttons, and plays video clips of the various subjects.

https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0Bz5DDP5Q_Sn2bHVvRHhwVzNRY2M&usp=sharing

The Vimeo link below is a sample of my video interview with Man Nguyen (a South Vietnamese veteran), and demonstrates the type of content that plays when a user clicks the play buttons within the interface.

<https://vimeo.com/147929324>

Ethics

The ethical considerations of my research were satisfied by making it explicit to each of my subjects that their participation was optional, and informing them of the nature of my project and how they would be presented in it. When subjects, such as Agent Orange victims, were not able to provide informed consent, I relied on the judgement of the local governing authority such as the VAVA organisation and the guidance of my Academic Director Co Thanh.

Observation and Analysis of Focus Project

I believe that my final project is a successful realisation of my original goal. I have created a multimedia website which showcases the narratives of individuals affected by or involved with the war's aftermath, and allows my audience to hear their voices directly through video interview footage. My current UI prototype features a portrait of my subject as the background of each window, the subjects name in large font, their occupation or background in smaller font, and three buttons, labeled "Clip 1" "Clip 2" and "Learn More". The two clip buttons will play a brief interview quote about my subject's relationship to the war, while Learn More provides contextual information. I hope to continue tweaking and improving the site in advance of its release this spring, but overall I am pleased with the project and its current form.

If I were to produce a similar project in the future, I would gather a greater diversity photographic and video content so that I could have had more flexibility while building the site. I also would have aspired to spend longer than one month in production, and thus have more time to grow closer with my subjects and establish intimacy with them. In addition, I hope to develop visual ways of representing content and topics, such as the land mines and Agent orange, independent of my human subjects. With greater visual experimentation, I believe my project could have provided a more nuanced exploration of different topics rather than merely through individual human portraits.

Conclusions

When I began this project, my initial research question was "How has Vietnam remembered the American War?" After a month of research and speaking with dozens of people across Vietnam, I have found that if such a broad question can have any answer, it is that the Vietnamese people remember the war with a hope for peace in their future. This desire for peace was expressed to me by veterans (of both north and south), social workers, and artists, and was the most common theme of my project. In reflecting on an experience as unique and transformative as this ISP, I feel gratitude for the people who opened their lives and hearts to me,

and for my supporters who made it possible for me to travel across a foreign land with friends to guide me every step of the way.

One personal effect this project has had on me is making the human consequences of war painfully palpable, from my experiences interviewing land mine victims to visiting the Agent Orange clinics in Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City. I now consider matters of international warfare with a vastly greater sensitivity to those being personally affected, and would always advise a pacifist approach when possible. Overall, this was an incredible, perception altering experience, and I have many memories from it that I will carry for years to come.